

## Saving Lives: AIR/PAIR

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### Anesthetists in Recovery: A Lifeline for Recovering CRNAs and their Families

#### From a recovering CRNA:

*"I thought I had used up all of my lifelines. I'd asked the audience (my operating room colleagues, but nobody seemed to have the right answer—they had no idea what was going on with me). I called a friend (my pastor) and, again, the answer or solution was not apparent (to me). I passed the question (changed jobs). Even the 50/50 (survived two car accidents and totaled my car) did not reveal to me the correct answer. I tossed out 'asking the expert' because I was so full of fear. When the game was over and I was found unconscious in my car after injecting propofol to "escape" the mess I was in, I was pretty sure I had lost it all: my family, my friends, my career. I was still alive but I didn't think I could face living. Little did I know that the one lifeline that would most help me understand the answer was right at my fingertips. In fact, I'd reached out to that lifeline earlier when I had a single moment of clarity, but rejected what I was sure was the wrong answer. That lifeline was AIR!"*

As a member and moderator of Anesthetists in Recovery (AIR), I know the truth of the statement above, and I witnessed its ongoing, lifesaving effects. For me, early in recovery, the obstacles of dealing with the consequences of my disease as they related to family, friends and career were insurmountable. It seemed truly impossible to rebuild after a path of devastation, let alone clear out the rubble left behind. I did not know where to commence living life clean and

sober, let alone how to repair all that damage. In addition, the shame, guilt and fear felt were nearly paralyzing. Fortunately, I was led to the AIR online group of peers who had walked in my shoes or were walking along with me. There are many support groups available to people seeking help staying sober and/or clean—Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery and Al-Anon Family Group for family members, to name a few. But there is no other highly specific, specialized and experienced group of peers offering support to CRNAs and students in recovery like AIR.

As highly educated and specialty trained nurses, CRNAs who suffer from the disease of addiction, whether it be due to alcohol, illicit drugs or anesthesia drugs (fentanyl, sufentanil or propofol) face an incredible amount of shame and guilt. This occurs both during the active disease process and while in treatment, and usually increases monumentally in early recovery as the realization of the devastation occurs. It seemed incomprehensible to me to be able to face the world again among my immediate family and friends, let alone in my professional life. Connecting with other individuals in recovery in the community was extremely helpful, as I learned I was not alone in this disease. But connecting specifically with other CRNAs in recovery, sharing in their experience, strength and hope, was, and continues to be, monumentally lifesaving.

A CRNA who has experienced substance abuse and alcoholism will face many issues professionally when working toward resuming a career in anesthesia. For some, this will not happen, for to them, resuming a career in anesthesia is a death sentence. For others, the process of recovery and a return to administering anesthetics is a long, arduous (sometimes necessary) process. It is a process that does not have to be done alone. Through AIR, peer support for CRNAs and students is available at <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/airforsobriety/>. Likewise, through Partners of Anesthetists in Recovery (PAIR), peer support is available for spouses/significant others and colleagues at <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/PAIRforsobriety/>.

**Anesthetists in Recovery, or AIR**, is a support group of certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) and student registered nurse anesthetists for CRNAs and students in recovery or seeking recovery from substance abuse, addiction and alcoholism. Begun in 1983 as a small group of recovering CRNAs keeping in touch via mail and phone calls, AIR has evolved into an online volunteer-moderated Yahoo group nearly 350 members strong. Side by side with AIR is Partners of Anesthetists in Recovery, or PAIR, a similarly moderated Yahoo group, for the spouses/significant others and loved ones of AIR members, and other CRNAs who are dealing with this disease. The peer support offered by these groups is essential to the lives of their members. Lives are being saved.

Find links to AIR and PAIR at [www.AANAPeerAssistance.com](http://www.AANAPeerAssistance.com), or see the online addresses in this article.

Remember, if you don't know what to do for yourself, a colleague or loved one when faced with addiction, help is available—see the "Getting Help" link from the left-hand sidebar of the AANA Peer Assistance page.

#### From the spouse of a recovering CRNA:

I am the husband of a recovering CRNA. 2006 was our chaotic year of trials. The problems caused by the addiction seemed never-ending and kept progressively getting more painful and frequent. Our daughter was only 2 years old when my wife first went for treatment. The disease kept mother and daughter apart for more than six months that year. If shame, guilt and fear were my wife's demons during the early days of recovery, anger and unrest were mine. Luckily for us, the recovery and spiritual programs we each engaged in gave us hope and kept us safe during those first fragile months after treatment.

While visiting my wife at her recovery center, I was introduced to the Al-Anon Family Group and support fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics. I had not heard of it, nor had I participated in anything similar before then. The program not only restored my life, but it also protected me from perhaps disturbing or unintentionally sabotaging my wife's focus and progress on her own program. I have now been a member of Al-Anon for seven years and have found strong support for my needs. But it is good to know that PAIR is available and also offers specific assistance and support to family members.

The Al-Anon program is based on the 12 steps from Alcoholics Anonymous. I found peace and hope in their meetings after having surrendered control of my life in turmoil to my higher power and sharing my personal experiences with other Al-Anon fellows. Addiction is a complicated disease. While alcohol or other substances could be the drugs of choice to an addict, anger and anxiety are the toxic substances that family members, relatives and friends of the user consume daily in consequent exasperation. The program helped me to focus on myself and on my own recovery. In time, I trusted to let go

and give my wife the room she needed to work on her own program.

I am extremely grateful to see my wife back to saving lives in the operating room as a CRNA, but now also as an advocate to her health-care colleagues who may be traveling down the lonely path of addiction. These lifesaving programs work if they are worked on daily. The programs lead to peaceful serenity, changing our own attitudes and giving us more balanced perspectives and realistic expectations.

On behalf of our young family, I thank the AANA for the educational efforts it invests to convey the important message that chemical dependency is a disease that is treatable. Al-Anon and Alateen can be found at <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org> ■

#### ► **Recommended Reading** Wellness

Milestones article "Peer Support Validity and Benefit," by Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP, available at [www.aana.com/wellnessmilestones](http://www.aana.com/wellnessmilestones)

## A Valuable Reference!

### For Practicing Clinicians and Educators

*Critical Events in Anesthesia:  
A Clinical Guide for Nurse Anesthetists*

#### Authors:

Sass Elisha, CRNA, EdD  
Mark Gabot, CRNA, MSN  
Jeremy Heiner, CRNA, MSN

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A Clinical Guide for Nurse Anesthetists

Sass Elisha  
Mark Gabot  
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